

Local Governance in Bangladesh

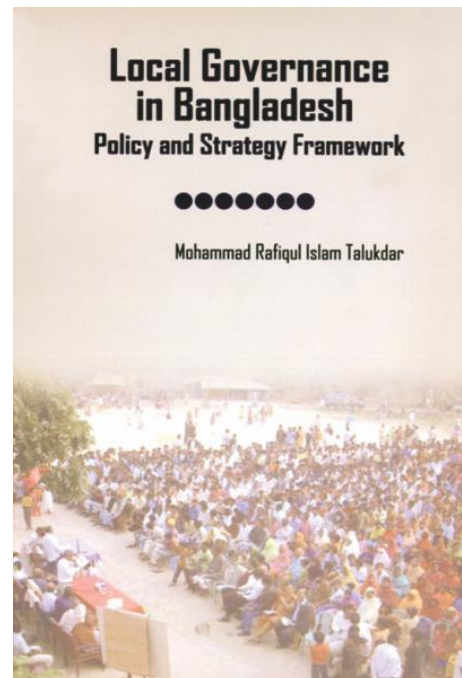
Policy and Strategy Framework Author: Mohammad Rafiqul Islam Talukdar

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Mohammad Rafiqul Islam Talukdar - Senior Programme Manager of BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), BRAC University, and author of the books “Rural Local Government in Bangladesh” and “Sthanio Shashoner Rajniti (Politics of Local Governance)” - has recently authored an important work titled “Local Governance in Bangladesh Policy and Strategy Framework.” The book is published with ISBN 978-984-91161-0-3 by Osder Publications, Dhaka, while the study of the same was commissioned by the Stephen Zuellig Graduate School of Development Management at Asian Institute of Management (AIM), Manila. I am pleased to make and publish this review as I was one of the two formal reviewers of the manuscript of the book, while the other one of the same was Professor Salahuddin M Aminuzzaman.

Author argues that absence of a local governance policy is a prioritized governance problem in Bangladesh, which affects effective implementation of decentralization policies and programmes sporadically undertaken from time to time. Democratic decentralization in line with the fiscal autonomy and local administrative reforms are in limbo for over three decades. The absence of a clear policy also affects institutional linkages of the local government bodies. In some cases overlapping of functions are evidenced in different Local Government institutions, while in other cases lack of coordination and inter agency cooperation are evident. More importantly, unless the country does have an aggregated local governance policy, it will not have a vision and road map for development of local governance. The author addresses issue along with the theories of decentralization. The book altogether consists of seven chapters.

Chapter Two provides “SWOT Analysis” in its three sub-chapters: internal analysis that includes analysis of strengths and weaknesses of the 'Local Government Division', opportunities and threats analysis of external environment, and SWOT perspective to the policy.



Chapter Three titled as “Force-field Analysis” starts with the stakeholder matrix and ends up with the force-field matrix. This analysis identified forces for and against the local governance policy design. It has also helped frame the policy strategically and design its advocacy as well as implementation strategy.

In Chapter Four “Local Governance in Bangladesh” focuses on how the current paradigm of decentralization opens avenues for the development of democratic local governance. In order to get the proper outcome, local government must be responsive to the citizen needs and gain the authority, resources and skills needed to be operative and accountable. Author argues here that the development of electoral politics at the local level is very important. The involvement of political parties in local political elections is at the center of several debates, but one of the vital aims of democratic decentralization concludes these debates. The Election Commission should be keen to transform the involvement of political parties towards a supportive climate for a competitive, free and fair election process.

Author has also addressed here some critical issues concerning good local governance, for instance, institutional linkages, inter-governmental relations, structuring local governments' borrowing, local government financial planning and management, gender mainstreaming in local governance, central to the institutional challenges and local government commission etc. Author claims that the constitutional commitment as well as spirit, to the extent that is evidenced, for ensuring good local governance in Bangladesh has never been made into reality. Power of the local government, national-local relationship, degree of democratic and fiscal decentralization, and functions as well as functionaries of the local government are not clearly included in the devolution package as directed in the constitution.

Chapter Five “Local Governance Policy” has two sub-chapters: proposed policy and policy framework. According to the author, the purpose of this policy is to develop a fully decentralized local government system at all spheres of the local administrative units so as to ensure full-fledged democracy and good local governance through citizen engagement, inclusiveness and empowerment. The goal is to guarantee that this local governance policy will be translated fully in laws, rules, regulations and practices by 2018, and to ensure that the public services delivery will be made available with fully decentralized approach so as to meet the civic satisfaction and needs without irrational system loss or corrupt practices by 2020. The overall objective of the policy is to facilitate political, economic, social, administrative and developmental empowerment of local citizens to make sure they attain the rights to development and public services, and set access to the knowledge and information.

As per the proposed policy, there will be two types of local government institutions in Bangladesh, namely rural local government institutions and urban local government institutions under a total of eight regional local government commissions and one national local government commission. 'Division' would no longer be treated as administrative unit of the government as it infringes on the constitution. Importantly, rural local government and urban local government units will never be geographically overlapped, which means that the rural local government units and urban local government units must be with separate constituencies fitted with clear-cut area mapping, but interfacing of rural-urban given the perspective of service delivery in particular should increasingly be harmonized. Author suggests functions, finance and functionaries must be

aligned to make democratic local governance process successful. Author also recommends the Local Government Division to be down-sized with limited scope of responsibilities.

Chapter Six “Policy Implementation Strategy” deals with strategic implementation plan, which is basically a management tool for policy to be measured and/or quantified followed by a package of procedures and actions. This is designed to assist concerned departments, commissions and agencies to manage and monitor implementation effectively. Author opines that sound strategic implementation planning is central to ensuring the successful delivery of the policy. Once the policy is approved, focus must go to the strategic implementation plan, and on executing and monitoring the policy implementation process by the concerned departments, commissions and agencies. Author further argues that policy implementation plan must be scalable and flexible, and it is expected to reflect the degree of exigency, urgency, innovation, complexity and/or sensitivity associated with the concerned policy appraisal.

In conclusion author points out the fact that one major political party alone cannot strengthen the local government institutions in Bangladesh because one political regime is too short to garner durable results in this domain. According to the author, in reality, political regimes here are changing between the two political parties, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Bangladesh Awami League (AL). As such, the government must realize the importance of the stated policy and bring the issue to the discussion table with the main opposition party to make a consensus. Then it has to allow Local Government Division to do the policy initiation with adoption or adaptation of this proposed one.

I think the book contains lots of very substantive new thinking which the policy makers can consider. It advances the reform agenda on local governance and is intended to assist policy makers in Bangladesh in making more informed choices on formulating a nuanced local governance policy and strategy. The work has certainly made interesting for reading. And it significantly adds value to the knowledge bank in the domain of decentralization and local governance.

The reviewer is an eminent expert on local governance and former commissioner of dissolved Local Government Commission in Bangladesh. He is currently Governance Director at MJF and Honorary Fellow at BIGD, BRAC University.

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